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ABSTRACT

The following two types of student mobility stand out as causing educational problems: (1) inner-city mobility, which is prompted largely by fluctuations in the job market; and (2) intra-city mobility, which is caused by upward mobility or by poverty and homelessness. Most research indicates that high mobility negatively affects student achievement, particularly when students are from low-income, less-educated families. High student mobility puts an enormous burden on schools. Services developed for one population may need to change; attempts to monitor school performance are hampered by changing school populations. Effective schooling research has provided some suggestions for dealing with highly mobile students, including parent education and handbooks, reception committees and guides, classroom buddies for new students, and inservice training for teachers. Recordkeeping is one of the most severe problems schools face. Approaches that may serve as examples are: (1) the Migrant Student Transfer System, an electronic record system for Puerto Rico and the mainland United States that is beginning to keep student records; (2) an educational passport system for Puerto Rican students moving between Puerto Rico and New York or Connecticut; and (3) a pilot recordkeeping system of the National Center for Education Statistics. Problems that may arise in the search for more efficient recordkeeping include student privacy and school accountability. A list of seven references is included. (SLD)

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HIGHLY MOBILE STUDENTS: EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

While America has long been a nation "on the move," today two types of student mobility stand out: 1) ***inner-city mobility***, which is prompted largely by fluctuations in the job market; and 2) ***intra-city mobility***, which may be caused by upward mobility, on the one hand, or poverty and homelessness, on the other. In fact, because of high rents, poor housing, and economic hardship, urban schools whose populations change as much as 100 percent a year are an increasing phenomenon (Schuler, 1990).

Mobility and Achievement

Although moving once or twice during the public school years may not be harmful, most research shows that high mobility lowers student achievement — particularly when the students are from low-income, less-educated families (Sewell, 1982; Straits, 1987). Students who attend the same school for their whole career are most likely to graduate, whereas the most mobile of the school populations — migrant students — has the highest rates of school failure and dropout (Lunon, 1986; B. Tobias, personal communication, June 1991).

Just as high poverty rates in a school depress achievement even for nonpoor students, schools with high mobility rates don't succeed even with students whose residence is stable. Schools with high dropout rates are more likely to be situated in unstable school districts, and to be in high-growth states (Neuman, 1987).

Of course, the depression of achievement associated with mobility may be compounded by other related factors: poverty, limited English fluency, poor housing, etc. For example, an analysis of student mobility found that children living with one parent move twice as frequently as children living with two parents, and that children in one-parent families also had lower achievement than those in two-parent families (Sewell, 1982).

The Burden of Student Mobility on Schools

High student mobility puts enormous stress on schools. Services developed for one population — for example, limited English proficient students — may suddenly become unnecessary, as many of its users move in the middle of the semester. Furthermore, even attempts to monitor school performance become meaningless if the student population tested one year has largely changed by the next. In urban schools already burdened by bureaucracy, mobility increases record-keeping.

Effective Schools for Mobile Students

Suggestions for interventions with highly mobile students are derived from the effective schooling research (Neuman, 1988). High expectations, an emphasis on excellence, small classroom size, personal contact, and opportunities for students to exhibit competence, initiative, and responsibility are considered critical (Druin, 1986). The issue of high expectations is especially important here, since there is evidence that when students enter classrooms in mid-semester, teachers tend to prejudge them unfavorably (Neuman, 1988; Sewell, 1982).

Among the suggestions for facilitating the acclimation of new students are these:

- parent education programs and handbooks that acquaint new parents with the effects of moving on their children, and with the procedures and customs of the new school.
- reception committees and tour guides.
- classroom buddies for the new students.
- inservice training for teachers in schools with highly mobile students.

New students should be watched for distress signals — aggression, withdrawal, over talkativeness, etc. — since the experience of moving can be similar to death and mourning for a young child (Neuman, 1988).

Most schools assume that, as with poverty, there is little or nothing they can do about student mobility itself. However, a pilot study in Rochester suggests that schools can lower mobility rates by sending letters home that describe the negative effects of mobility on grades and graduation rates and helping parents solve landlord disputes or find new housing nearby (Schuler, 1990).

Record-Keeping

One of the biggest administrative, and therefore pedagogical, problems with mobile students stems from lack of prompt transfer of records. Students may be given inappropriate placement, and even held back, while their receiving school waits three to five months for their records (Neuman, 1988; Sewell, 1982). These record-keeping problems have been most obvious with migrant students. However, record-keeping problems have long occurred with many students less clearly designated as "transient." Voluntary desegregation is

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well known for creating havoc with district record-keeping (A. Wells, 1991, personal communication). More recently, homeless students have created a new surge in record transfers, and districts have often been financially penalized for students who were counted absent when they were already enrolled in a different district. Finally, although record-keeping has not been discussed in relationship to school choice, this new form of student mobility may create its own record-keeping nightmare — especially since schools will have little reason on the surface to cooperate with competing schools by providing rapid record transfers.

Models and Pilots in Student Record-Keeping

In 1968, the ***Migrant Student Transfer System*** (MSTS) was instituted as part of Title I/Chapter 1. The MSTS is an electronically-based record system in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, with both health and academic information on migrant secondary students. Unfortunately, in part because only some schools have computer terminals and so much communication is still done by mail, the MSTS is currently underutilized. A study in 1989 reported that only ten states kept data for 70 percent or more of their migrant students (Villarreal, 1989).

Under a Ford Foundation grant, a paper system called a ***passport*** was recently piloted for Puerto Rican students moving between the island and either New York City or districts in the state of Connecticut. Like the MSTS, the passport contains both health and academic information. However, unlike the MSTS, passports were created to enable the students themselves to take charge of their own academic careers. Students carry their passports with them when they move from the island to the mainland, or vice versa, ensuring rapid enrollment in the appropriate class. Of course, the system requires cooperation between the school systems, which must both advertise the existence of passports to students and fill them out, and there have been some problems getting both ends equally involved (E. Davila, June 1991, personal communication).

Finally, prompted by the drive for national educational statistics of all kinds, an electronic nation-wide record transfer system for all students is currently being piloted by the National Center for Education Statistics and the Council of Chief State School Officers. While Florida already has a state-wide electronic record-keeping system, and states such as Texas, California, and Wyoming are considering such systems, the lack of a uniform, national record-keeping system has made collecting good school data difficult.

Although not geared directly to the needs of highly mobile students, the proposed national system should solve the problem of rapid record transfer. It would also increase reliability and consistency in the interpretation of student records. Finally, because all data would be on-line, it would decrease costs to districts of transferring records (B. Clements, June 1991, personal communication; R. Valdivieso, June 1991, personal communication).

Two possible problems arise in the new search for a more efficient record-keeping system for mobile and other students. The first is student privacy: as material becomes more accessible, it may also be more difficult to ensure confidentiality. The second is school accountability: record-keeping that aids in making schools more accountable to the communities they serve may not always coincide with records that serve a national purpose. Thus, as schools join in a national system, they will have to be careful to ensure that they are also keeping data for their own purposes.

— Carol Ascher

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (212) 678-3433. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

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